



"No to Botha" demonstration, London, 2 June 1987

Demonstrations and Marches

The above image is of the Anti-Apartheid Movement's "No to Botha" demonstration in London, England on 2 June 1987, while British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was entertaining South African State President P W Botha. It was a large, impressive march, mobilised at short notice.

Demonstrations are Agitprop. They are works of art and they are designed. They are also the product of organisation, co-ordination and logistics.

The best way to get people to attend a demonstration is to get them involved in preparing it.

Demonstrations are different in different places. The Anti-Apartheid Movement demonstrations had a particular look, to some extent because of the individual graphic designer who was regularly commissioned to create the posters. He used short slogans and large, black-on-white lettering.

Two posters were stapled to a stick about 1.5 metres in length, with two sheets of the grey cardboard called “chipboard” in between, to give stiffness, and all stitched together with more staples. This technique is still used in the U.K., but it is not used in South Africa.

Here, people hold up placards in front of them with two hands.

But what South Africans do, which British demonstrators hardly know how to do, is they dance, and they dance with marshals, who keep the front straight and maintain a slow pace by marking time at intervals.

South Africans also achieve a visual effect with clothing, such a T-shirts.

Organisation

You have to get a permit to march. You get it from the police. That is the first thing.

Then, in South Africa, buses will usually have to be paid for and arranged in terms of where the pick-up points are to be. This is very expensive.

In South Africa, and elsewhere, there is nearly always a memorandum to be handed over at the destination.

The order of business is the assembly, where there may be speeches; the actual march; the destination (where there may be more speeches); and then possibly a second destination and/or final rally in a park or a square.

Often there is a truck that serves as a mobile platform for speakers, equipped with a public address system.

Really big marches can close down a major city.

Marches are peaceful. They are not supposed to be violent or ugly in any way. If there are problems, it is usually because of “*Agents provocateurs*” – people who are not with the organisers, but are against them.

Mobilisation

With marches, as with other events, the number of people reached by the advance publicity can be exponentially larger in proportion to the time available for mobilisation. So, if in two weeks you can mobilise 50 000, then in three weeks you might be able to organise 100 000 and in three weeks, 250 000. These are imaginary figures, of course. The point is that the more time you give yourself, the more likely you are to get a crowd that is many times larger.

So get an early start. When is the start? You can prepare the ground, earlier. For an example, the reason the “No to Botha” march was possible at short notice was that there was a pre-existing, well-organised movement, with local groups all over the country, and practised lines of communication.

But the main starting point for organisation of an event, as such, is when the date, time and venue have been fixed. After that you can communicate your event to the world, and especially to your potential supporters.

As was said above, the best way to get people involved is to give them work to do. So, you ask people to phone their friends until they have ten, or a hundred, known people who are committed to taking part in the march. You also ask people to bring a band of volunteers. You can make them your marshals. You will need hundreds of marshals for a big demo. If you have too many marshals, don't worry, there are plenty of other jobs to be done.

The mobilisation of volunteers is a chain reaction that will serve also to spread the news. How you get the mainstream media to cover it, is a mixture of the conventional (press release; press conference) and the original (good slogans; cartoons; T-shirts; stunts). Sometimes, celebrity show-business support can help (but it can also limit).

As much as you can start the chain reaction of mobilisation in your own organisation, so also you would want other, supporting organisations to do the same thing. Each organisation is a means of mass communication in itself, and it

needs to be used as such when a big demonstration is called for.

The art of unity-in-action comes into play at such times. It is possible and desirable to accommodate very many organisations in a big march, and you will want to do so. This means not being sectarian, but it also means preserving the basic slogans and purpose of the action. Meetings will be held. There may be a steering committee. Where there are press conferences, the different component organisations will want to have their say.

Usually, it is possible to defend the basic slogans but at the same time to allow organisations to express themselves by some variation in the banners and placards that they bring.

Means of general publicity will include posters in public places, provided that these go up some time in advance. Posters arriving the day before the event are a big waste of money.

The prior announcement of well-supported speakers expected at the event can be a good draw.

Each demonstration is a school of organisation for thousands of new recruits to this complex form of political expression and Agitprop. These are people for whom participation in your demonstration is their first step and first experience of public political activity.

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